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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ideas on restructuring teacher education in the field of special education and the ensuring implications for training personnel. The reform of the American education system requires the simultaneous reform of the teacher education system. The different procedural standards, methodologies, and certification tracks used by each state, and often each university, in special education teacher education make effective reform difficult to achieve. To educate children of varying abilities and disabilities in the same setting requires that a true partnership be cultivated between regular education and special education professionals. Efforts to implement models that infuse special education concepts into the general education curriculum have met with resistance by both general and special educators. Moving toward the ideal of a merged general and special education calls for combining regular education and special education classes in teacher education, and incorporating team teaching by faculty who represent both general and special education. Teachers of students with severe and low incidence disabilities should have additional training beyond the basic special education level. (JDD)

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Restructuring Teacher Education: The Integration of Undergraduate Curriculum

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The concept of restructuring teacher education encompasses and impacts a part of every other topic presented at the 1990 Forum on Emerging Trends. The group was assigned the specific task of brainstorming "restructuring teacher education" as it related to special education and the overall reform movement in education. The ideas presented here are representative of that group's work.

According to (Watkins, 1990a) the 21st century educator will be an individual who has completed a professional teacher preparation program and who possesses teaching and research skills. Preparation of such a professional would influence the way the field now prepares general and special educators. Such a change would cause teacher preparation to focus on training all teachers to teach all students (Education Week, 1990) (e.g., students with disabilities and students with above average abilities).

Defining the Issues

Special education teacher education is comprised of a variety of training systems. Each state, and often each university, employs different procedural standards, methodologies, and certification tracks. These training systems may require an individual to be certified or licensed first in general education and then to pursue a general special education endorsement at the baccalaureate level. These programs often permit specialized categorical training only at the graduate level. Other programs allow special education licensure to be given at the baccalaureate level without the inclusion of regular education training. The four members of this task group represented four different states and four different system requirements. As noted previously, diversity in requirements and standards appears to be the case throughout the country. At the present time over one hundred different certifications are available in special education.

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The educational reform movement encompasses all facets of the American education system. Given current practices (e.g., lack of reciprocity among the states), the field appears to be looking at school reform for conflict resolution. Just as schools strive to improve opportunities for mainstreaming so should teacher education work to prepare educators for that setting. The reform of the American education system requires the simultaneous reform of the teacher education system (Watkins, 1990b).

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Alternative Solutions: Integration of Systems

Integrating two separate, but similar systems, was the central theme on which our forum group focused. In an interview with Tom Skrtic, Thousand (1990) mentions the collapsing of two bureaucracies, and coordination by working together to invent unique teaching practices in order to produce the "name product" (p. 32). The restructuring of teacher education committee envisioned school reform as an element of integration of general and special education. Some school systems have developed ways to assist special education teachers in integrated settings to become versed on curriculum and teaching approaches. These efforts have included in-service training, allowing teachers to spend time observing general education classrooms, and developing collaborative models (Lehr, 1987). However, such education occurs subsequent to preservice training. If all students are to be educated in integrated settings, integration must be a part of preservice teacher preparation. Thus, if the field is to actually reform American education to the degree that every child has the right to learn in the same educational setting as every other child, a true partnership must be cultivated between regular education and special education professionals.

Inhibitors to Obtaining the Ideal

From 1975 to 1983, the Division of Personnel Preparation awarded grants to universities and colleges through a competition referred to as the Dean's Grants. The purpose was to implement models targeted at the infusion of special education concepts in the general education curriculum (Aksamit, 1990). While some successes were reported, generally this approach was resisted by both general and special educators. The general educators were not academically or experientially prepared to address special education issues and curricula adaptations in their courses. Special educators were equally concerned about their general education colleagues' inabilities to enthusiastically teach and demonstrate techniques uniquely designed to ensure that the needs of handicapped students would be met within general education (L.M. Bullock, personal communication, February 6, 1990). Therefore, the traditional method of training general education teachers in special education techniques has continued to be to add courses to existing general education requirements. Today's public school students have needs arising from diverse family structures, and other differences (Patterson, Purkey, & Parker, 1986). These challenges may be best tackled by merging the best that general and special education have to offer.

Strategies for Moving Toward the Ideal

In order to accomplish this merger, teacher education courses would combine regular education and special education classes. Ultimately, there would no longer be two separate course structures. Separate course structures have long been viewed as repetitive and redundant (Reynolds, 1982). These new

courses would best be team taught by faculty who represent the orientations of both general and special education. In this way, students would have the full benefit of learning a variety of adaptations for each technique/method taught.

This integration of systems was only reviewed by the forum restructuring committee in the context of teaching individuals with mild disabilities. The group was unanimous in their opinion that all teachers of students with special needs must first be educated in basic teaching principles. The committee agree that trainees wishing to work with students with severe disabilities must acquire additional knowledge in an area of specialization. Brogenschild, Lauritzen, and Metzke (1988) reported on an attrition study indicating that teachers who educate students with more severe disabilities remain on the job longer when they have more education in a specific disability content area. Accordingly, the restructuring committee recommended that teachers of students with severe and low incidence disabilities have additional training requirements beyond the basic special education level.

The restructuring committee did not equate having more specialized training with needing to teach in a segregated environment. Rather, specialized training would be used to create new learning environments and aid in further integration of students with severe disabilities into typical education settings with their normally developing and age appropriate peers.

In a perfect merger everybody wins: such a merger was the goal of the forum conference restructuring committee. This objective is interpreted to mean that every child has the right to learn and grow in the same educational setting as every other child. In the process of restructuring and reforming education systems, we must not lose sight of this common goal of general and special education.

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